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MEDICINE AND ASTROLOGY.

A PAPER READ BEFORE

THE NUMISMATIC AND ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

OF PHILADELPHIA,

ON THURSDAY EVENING, JUNE 7, 1866.

By HENRY PHILLIPS, Jr.

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MEDICINE AND ASTROLOGY.

In presenting to night to the Library of our Society a curious and rare work upon the above subject, I cannot but think that a succinct account of the book and its contents may prove of interest.

The belief in astrology is among the earliest superstitions that possessed the human race, and that it should be so, seems natural, when we reflect that mankind's first condition was nomadic in its nature; that forced to dwell in the open air the contemplation of the natural phenomena which surrounded it, and of the celestial portents and prodigies of such wonderful occurrence in their regularities and in their changes, soon led to a belief in the connection of the heavenly bodies with terrestrial affairs, and to a credence in the influence exerted by them upon the destinies of man. And those who arrogated to themselves the superior position in the rude communities of primitive times united in themselves all knowledge such as then was possible to be obtained, and claiming power to read in the stars the fate of the world, demanded also, that they should be believed to have such revelations therefrom as were of beneficial nature. The belief in the influence of the celestial bodies is a pleasing one, as it, by depriving man of his free will, must also deprive him of his responsibility, and to a lucky or unlucky star must be charged what otherwise might be accounted for in some less satisfactory manner. Granted that a constellation or certain conjunction of the heavens ruled at the native's birth, it was necessary to believe that the circumstances portended by such an occurrence would also accompany him throughout his existence. That, therefore, when any thing befell such a one, it was necessary to know his past astrological life in order to know his future, whether for good or for ill.

Burton in his Anatomy of Melancholy declines to discuss the

question as he expresses it, as to whether "Sextus Empiricus, Picus Mirandula, Sextus ab Heminga, Pererius, Erastus, Chambers, &c., have so far prevailed with any man that he will attribute no virtue at all to the heavens, or to sun or moon, more than he doth to their signs at an inn keeper's post or tradesman's shop," and gives as his opinion "that the stars incline but not compel." Doubtless his opinion was that which the learned of his day professed, and the remark of Kepler, that "astrology, though a fool was a daughter of a wise mother, to whose support and life the foolish daughter was indispensable,"* contributed yet still to preserve its credit, and even as late as 1705, so little was it thoroughly eradicated from common belief, that the editor of "Les Connaissance des Tems," found it necessary to apologize for the absence of all predictions in that astronomical work, stating the academy had never recognized the solidity of the rules given by the ancients for discovering the future by the configuration of the stars. Although the superstition has long since been driven away by the steady advance of civilization, so that its existence is but precarious even in the hearts of the ignorant and degraded, its traces are indelibly stamped upon the every day language, even of the most educated classes, and our best literature may be found full of words and phrases left by the subsiding waves of error.

"Old errors," says Trench,† "dismissed long ago, may survive in language, being bound up in words that grew into use when those errors found credit, and which now that those errors are dismissed, maintain still their currency among us. * * * * * * No one now believes in astrology, that the planet under which a man may happen to be born will affect his temperament, will make him for life of a disposition grave or gay, lively or severe. Yet we seem to affirm as much in language, for we speak of one as *jovial* or *saturnine* or *mercurial;* 'jovial' as being born under the planet Jupiter or Jove, which was the joyfullest star, and of happiest augury of all; a gloomy severe person is said to be 'saturnine,' as

* Brande's Encyc. † Trench on the Study of Words.

born under the planet Saturn, who was considered to make those that own his influence, and were born when he was in the ascendant, grave and stern as himself; another we call 'mercurial,' or light hearted, as those born under the planet Mercury were accounted to be. The same faith in the influence of the stars still survives in 'disastrous,' 'ill starred,' 'ascendency,' 'lord of the ascendant,' and indeed in 'influence' itself."

These are but a very few instances which I will not prolong farther, that I may not commit too great a trespass upon the valuable time of the learned gentlemen who to-night are so kindly granting me their attention.

The title of the work that has induced these few remarks is as follows :—

De ratione et usu dierum criticorum opus recens natum, in quo mens tum ipsius Ptolemœi, tum aliorum astrologorum hac in parte dilucidatur. Authore, Thoma Boderio Rhotomagensis Diœcesis. Cui accessit Hermes Trismegistus de decubitu infirmorum, nunquam anteà in lucem editus. Parisiis, in officina Audœni Parvi ad Lilii insigne, via Jacobæa. Anno Salutis, M. D. L. V. Small 4to. p. 57.

Which title may be thus translated:

"A new book on the doctrine and use of critical days in which the system of Ptolemy and other astrologers is illustrated and explained, by Thomas Boderius, of the diocese of Rouen; to which is added a work never before published, by Hermes Trismegistus, on the bed keeping of the sick. Paris, at the warehouse of Owen Pettit, at the sign of the Lily, Rue Jacob. Anno Domini, 1555."

Upon the title page is a rude wood-cut device of the printer, representing the letters O. P., above a lily in a shield supported by two lions rampant, while on a scroll above is the motto *Petit a petit.* The whole is a play upon words; the letters O. P. being the initial of the publisher's name, the lily being the sign of his shop, and the motto being a pun upon his name.

On the last page we find the following :—

Parisiis, excudebat Andreas Wechelus, sub Pegaso, in vico Bellovaco, Anno Salutis, 1555.

The work is dedicated to Orontius Finèus, (Oronce Finè,) Professor of Mathematics in the Royal College at Paris. A preface follows, in the course of which the author mentions his being advanced in years, after which then as was often the custom, appears a page of epigrams in Greek and Latin laudatory of Doctor Boderius and his work.

But scanty information is extant to us respecting this author, but he is known to have been a physician of Rouen. The book must be rare as I have never met with it in any foreign catalogue through which I have searched, nor have I ever seen or heard of another copy.

I translate a few of the opening sentences, so as to present some general idea of the scope of the book.

"Part first, concerning the doctrine of critical days, wherein is for the first time made known, how very necessary the knowledge of astrology is to a physician."

"After beginning by setting forth our premises, we subjoin the words of Hippocrates, than whom no one is greater among the chiefs of the physicians, where in his treatise "de crisi et hora decumbentium," he says: Of what nature can he be, that doctor who is not familiar with astrology? Let no man trust himself into the hands of such, for he is not a thorough physician; he is like unto a blind man who searcheth his way with a staff, nor the adornment of the physician's name doth he deserve. Nor can any man be skilled in medicine who knoweth not the times and ways of the heavenly bodies and of the influences which the moon exerciseth upon the human frame. * * * * * * He who plyeth the healing art unversed in natural magic or practical astrology, his soul, saith Galen, wandering perpetually in darkness will wax old; not only doth he fail in rectitude, but in verity may he be called a deceiver. Moreover, if he hath diligently considered the hour of sickness, and hath by laboring in his vocation received its fullest fruits, then truly will it be granted to him to know and to foretell the issue of the disease; for Galen saith we should inquire the figure of the patient's geniture; all which things we may thoroughly learn from astronomy, by the acknowledgment of all

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men. Now, resolve in thy soul how very much this most noble art is needful to the true physician; * * * * * for as Hermes saith that after God the sun and the moon are the life of all that liveth."

The work then goes on in a similar strain, being broken up into many chapters of natures like the following:

"Why the Seventh day is that of the best event."

"Why he who practiseth this art should carefully seek to know the hour wherein the patient took to bed."

"How if the true hour of the sickness escapeth the physician, the sick man dieth."

"Wherefore certain days are critical."

"Of the angels who are our guardians, and the ministers and workers of the mandate of the divine providence."

"Of the seven rulers of the world," viz: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury, and the Moon.

"Of special and general matters known by astrology," as for example, the influence of the moon on mankind; how, when she waxeth, men's bodies become full of humours, and when the wane arriveth, they become againe void: how, therefore, the course of the moon should be regarded as it relateth to the sick. So generally Venus is taken to regard womenfolk, Mercury the Lord of the Seventh House wisdom, the Sun dignities and honors."

"Whence come the intercalary days."

"Of the very great power of Hylecq and Alcocodem."

"Much faith must we hold in Hylecq, the giver of life; and Alcocodem, he who bringeth on length of years."

"Given the geniture of the patient and the years since Hylecq and Alcocodem to determine the event of the disease."

"Sixteen rules for determining the critical days from the use of the following table," which consisteth in a Ptolemœian Zodiack divided into sixteen parts. And the first part closes with an astrological table, ANTISCIA, in Signis, Gradibus, &c., &c.

The second part is upon the practical usages of the knowledge of critical times, showing the days when he that has

sickened must die and those whereon he may recover. It is chiefly taken up with astrological schemes, of which there are fifty-seven, and their explanations, which doubtless were of great value in their time; as, "The moon when she shineth from the lord of the ascendant unto him of the eighth house, beareth death." Yet not alway, for when the disease is of a chronic nature, the sign is not absolutely fatal. "The lord of the ascendant on the eighth house, in conjunction with Mars or Saturn, sheddeth death." These horoscopes are those of patients to whom Dr. Boderius had been professionally called in, and this was his record of their diseases, diagnoses, treatment and results. We transcribe one as a curiosity.

"Nicholas De Camp was taken ill with a most severe sickness on the 16th day of June, 1554, about the 9th hour of the morning. Although phelebotomy was practised at the command of the attending physician, yet did he take no relief, but after the moon had changed her place the disease altered, and after a severe illness and great danger of life, the patient recovered. Be ye therefore heedful of this, when the moon is in a good position in critical times, and those days bring no relief, they portend judgment of death, a long sickness or change of disease."

The second part closeth with an apostrophe to the readers of the book, and surely those who have read it through deserve to be congratulated for their pains. He tells them that much as he respects the great names of Ptolemy and Aben Esra yet all the things he advances are not vain and empty speculations, but those which he has put to the proof and tried, and all the things he recommends are those which in a long practice he has found to be thoroughly reliable. "Quemadmodum hoc in opere satis a me demonstratum est, hujusce rei experientia fidem faciet: ego nisi fuissem gravis annis et ætate jam confecta, non ante annos novem fuissem in lucem editurus nam et adjecturus eram, ea quoque qua experentia comperissem, sed volui aliis fenestram aperire et (ut vetere proverbio dicitur) glaciem scindere; * * * * * * quicquid a me scriptum est lubens submitto judicio ecclesiae et doctorum."

Unwilling that his learning should perish with him, the old man offers his experience to a subsequent generation. Had he not been stricken with years he would not have come forward as an author, but he wished for others to open the window and to rend asunder the obstructions to a free passage of the light.

No doubt he was an intensely regular physician; but not of that school who prescribed "powdered moles when burnt to ashes," "hairs from the bellies of skinks," (whatever they were), "mummy," and other horrible and barbarous expedients. Dr. Boderius was of the school similar to that of the barber in the Arabian nights, who perpetually ceased to exercise his tonsorial craft in order to take observations of the sun, and to tell his unfortunate customer what he supposed the issue of his adventures might be.

I fancy I should place more implicit confidence in my physician if he were to consult the pharmacopœia, than if he were thoroughly conversant with all the astrological books that ever were published.

Note.—The celebrated Dr. Erasmus Darwin seems to have held some belief in the effect of extra terrestrial influences, as will be observed from the following passage, noticed by me since reading the above:

"The periodic returns of so many diseases coincide with the diurnal, monthly and annual rounds of time; that any one who would deny the influence of the sun and moon on the periods of the quotidian, tertian and quartan fevers, must deny their effect on the tides and on the seasons." Zoonomia, (Edit. 1796,) vol. ii. p. 510.

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